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SUBJECT: MODERATES PREDICT MORE VIOLENCE

REF: BASRAH 013

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CLASSIFIED BY: Louis L. Bono, Director, REO Basrah, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (S/NF) Summary and Introduction. Two tribal leaders and a lawyer, all with close ties to the Coalition, told REO Basrah that they expect violence to erupt in Basrah after Coalition Forces implement Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC). This ominous prediction was delivered by Sheikh Mansur al-Kanaan on February 1, Assaf al-Nahi, a lawyer employed by the Basrah Court of Appeals and the Basrah Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) on February 7, and Sheikh Kadim al-Qatrani on February 8. They contend that British inaction to capture militia leaders and deepening Iranian penetration into southern Iraq have sown the seeds for militia warfare. They add that the Coalition has done a poor job fighting the "war of influence," leaving the Basrah public unaware of the good things it has done on their behalf. The three figures maintain close relations with the Coalition and are considered credible sources. End Summary.

BASRAH SOURCES HOLD BRITISH ACCOUNTABLE FOR INACTION

¶2. (S/NF) All three laid the blame for the impending violence at the feet of the British military. Sheikh Mansur said he has followed British advice for the past several years. He has attempted to promote peace and tolerance while providing the British military with the names, addresses, telephone numbers and movements of militia commanders. He said the British have consistently acted slowly, weakly or not at all, with the result that Basrah is in worse security shape today than two years ago, when elections were first held. To illustrate, Mansur said he informed the British of the hour and place of a militia commanders' meeting in late January, but they did not mount a raid. The sheikh also castigated the British for bowing to pressure and issuing an apology to Basrah Governor Mohammad al-Wa'eli who demanded that the British strike the name of his younger brother, Ismail al-Wa'eli, from the list of the most wanted criminals in Basrah. (Comment: The younger al-Wa'eli is, by all accounts, the governor's key henchman, running assassination and kidnapping squads. The British are aware of the governor's shortcomings, but he is one of the few leaders to have expressed public support for the Coalition in recent months. End comment.) Mansur said the British have jeopardized the lives of Basrah moderates, including his own, by failing to take swift and decisive action against the militia leaders. The sheikh is now under mounting pressure from members of his tribe

to exact retribution from Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) and Sayed Shuhada militia gunmen, who, Mansur believes, assassinated a cousin and nearly assassinated another. One of Mansur's cousins, who is employed by the REO, said that tribal hotheads are calling the sheikh a coward for not ordering reprisals. "My nationality is more important than my tribe," Mansur told the REO director.

COALITION TAINTED BY DEALING WITH CORRUPT CONTRACTORS

¶3. (S/NF) Assaf al-Nahi, who bears a bullet wound on his neck from his anti-smuggling efforts, predicted that the judicial system will collapse and assassinations will surge when Basrah goes to PIC. He echoed Sheikh Mansur's fear that the JAM, Fadilla and Badr militias will carve up the city into sectors of control. Al-Nahi referred to the Basrah governor and most of the provincial council as "thieves" and described their corrupt practices. He went on to name local contractors that are ripping-off Coalition reconstruction funds and recommended that the Coalition switch its business dealings to reputable firms, such as those related to the al-Musawi group. (Note: Al-Nahi has ties to the Musawi family, one of the most respected families in Basrah. End note.) By dealing with crooked companies, al-Nahi said the Coalition is gaining a reputation as a supporter of thieves. Nevertheless, al-Nahi added that most of the journalists and the 2,000 lawyers in Basrah support the Coalition. "Thousands of people are willing to work with the Coalition Forces," Al-Nahi said. Both he and Sheikh Mansur said the Coalition needs its own media outlet to spread information about its programs to rebuild southern Iraq. The REO director agreed, saying the Coalition is doing a poor job "waging the war of influence." (Note: The REO is working with the Coalition to improve our public relations. End note.)

TRIBAL LEADER SAYS PREMATURE PIC COULD TRIGGER CIVIL STRIFE

¶4. (S/NF) Sheikh al-Qatrani, a blunt talker, opened his meeting with the REO director saying that he has not seen any positive results from his numerous discussions with REO officials about Basrah violence. He said the situation continues to

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deteriorate, evidenced by the murder of two Iraqi interpreters working with British forces during Operation Sinbad. If PIC is implemented prematurely, "crime will rise and the people of Basrah will say that the United States overthrew Saddam Hussein and brought us civil war," al-Qatrani said. (Note: MND(SE) planned on PIC during April/May, but is now considering August. End note.) The sheikh, who was deputy governor of Basrah under the CPA, said public safety began to deteriorate when political parties gained power through elections. They placed their gunmen on the police force, creating the current network of armed militias. Al-Qatrani said of the 15,000 names on the Basrah police payroll, only about 3,000 are legitimate. He recommended the police force be cleansed and reconstituted with tribal recruits. The REO director said that al-Qatrani's proposal had merit, and he would raise it with MND(SE), but it was up to Iraqis to take the lead.

IRAN SUPPORTS COMPETING IRAQI MILITIAS

¶5. (S/NF) Both sheikhs and al-Nahi said that Iran is wielding growing influence in southern Iraq. According to Mansur and al-Nahi, Iran supports JAM and Badr, which are deadly rivals, as well as the Harakat Hezbollah and Sayed Shuhada militias. Mansur said Iran has infiltrated JAM through ex-Badr members. He named the JAM head in southern Iraq as Jamal Jaafar Abu Mahdi al-Muhendis, a member of the Council of Representatives in Baghdad. Al-Kanaan related that al-Muhendis had a falling out with SCIRI leader Abdul Azziz al-Hakim and defected to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. According to Mansur, al-Muhendis is from the Babil/Hillah area and has Iranian nationality. Mansur and al-Nahi said that Iran's leading Ayatollah, Ali Khamenei, supports Badr as a moderate force to engage in the political process, while the Iranian Revolutionary Guards lend their backing to JAM, the primary purveyor of violence against the Coalition and its Iraqi collaborators.

ABU HATEM, PRINCE OF THE MARSHES, A TURNCOAT?

¶ 6. (S/NF) Mansur said that Iranian-backed Harakat Hezbollah has formed an alliance with a prominent figure from Maysan Province, Abu Hatem, the Prince of the Marshes, lionized for his Robin Hood-like resistance to Saddam Hussein. Mansur said he was shocked to learn that Abu Hatem, once a friend, has developed relations with Iran. He said it is a betrayal of Abu Hatem's principles. Asked why Iran is so deeply involved in southern Iraq, al-Nahi said many Iranians oppose their own government and want reforms. The militant, conservative forces in Iran want to prevent a liberal democratic political system from developing on Iran's western flank, he added. Al-Nahi said his many Iranian acquaintances in Basrah provide him with a good deal of information about conditions inside Iran and offered to introduce these contacts to REO staff. The outspoken Sheikh al-Qatrani said that in order to stop the arming and funding of Iraqi militias by Iran, the border must be sealed and a truck cargo inspection system must be installed.

¶ 7. (S/NF) Comment. Basrah is beginning to resemble Chicago during prohibition. Many of the power brokers are driven by jealousy and greed, and are either protected by or beholden to militia. Added to this is the Iranian support for the Islamacists and militia. In the meantime, the moderates, who are fighting for political (and in some cases literal) survival, question why the Coalition does so little to support them. (See also reftel.) They are growing desperate and may resort to their own private militias for their survival.

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